

Wantastegok

Language and the Land

Joe Rivers and Rich Holschuh

The secrets of our culture lie hidden within our language.

— Joseph Elie Joubert, Abenaki author

LONG BEFORE PRINTER'S INK was used to reproduce our narratives, and well before writing systems themselves were devised, people have expressed themselves to one another through spoken language. Language itself—any language—can be described as a communication tool developed and deployed by a culture, one that embodies a structured way of facilitating understanding through mutual, and thus intelligible, conventions, and thereby fosters cohesion among its members. These common understandings spring from a group's shared view of the world around them, a way of making sense of what they have encountered. And an intrinsic (but often overlooked) aspect of these diverse cultural developments is that they necessarily take shape in a physical context—in other words, in a place.

Our first language—the means by which we communicate with everything else—is informed by the reciprocal relationship we have with our place in the world. And the quality of that relationship, as with any relationship, is affected by the ways we commit to its well-being: whether and how we engage mindfully with our situation.

In Western civilization today, few of us intentionally engage in conversation with our place, if we're even aware of it at all.

In 1864, Vermonter George Perkins Marsh, considered one of the founders of the modern conservation movement, wrote—in his book *Man and Nature*—that people were no longer aware that the essential, reciprocal relationship between humans and their



George Perkins Marsh.

(Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)



environment was being replaced by unilateral, anthropocentric, and typically economic interests. Instead, for at least four thousand years, we have been telling ourselves a different story—one that doesn't involve a reciprocal relationship with nature but, rather, turns on a theme of controlling, not conversing with, the place where one is situated. As Marsh observed, this one-sided narrative, in general, might not end well, and it certainly has not gone well in many specific instances.



Since long before the advent of writing, right here in the Connecticut River Valley there have lived a people known as the Sokoki Abenaki (or, translated into English from the original Sokwakiak, “The People Who Separated”).

They are the original people of this place, and they are still here. Their native tongue, Aln8ba8dwaw8gan—the Western Abenaki language—is still extant, but greatly endangered. (Note that the Abenaki letter 8 signifies a nasal “o(n)” sound, as in the French *garçon*.) To the Abenaki, this place is known as Wantastegok, “At the River Where Something Is Lost,” referring to the confluence of the Wantastekw, which we now call the West River, and the Kwenitekw, or Long River—now known as the Connecticut River. (An intriguing local manuscript holds that, before the construction of the Vernon Dam in 1909 raised the level of the Connecticut fifteen feet, a whirlpool near the confluence would pull objects into the bedrock mid-channel—making the site an entrance to the underworld.)

***Wantastegok: At the River
Where Something Is Lost***
by John Dimick.

(Courtesy of the artist.)



West River petroglyphs, photographed at Indian Rock, Brattleboro, by John Lovell on behalf of Professor Edward Hitchcock, 1866.

(Courtesy of Amherst College Library Collections, Amherst, Massachusetts.)



A lithograph from the 1850s depicting the images carved into rock by indigenous people in the West River in Brattleboro, or Wantastegok.

(Courtesy of the Vermont Historical Society.)

The Sokoki and their ancestors have lived in this valley for twelve thousand years. Small family bands followed a seasonally determined lifestyle of hunting, fishing, and foraging from the natural abundance. Nearly ten centuries ago, horticultural systems were added to the highly refined cultural practices the people had developed by living in a finely attuned, reciprocal relationship in their homelands. The earliest archaeological evidence of indigenous agriculture in northern New England was found just upriver at Skitchewaug—now Springfield, Vermont—where nearly one-thousand-year-old stored corn, beans, and squash were recovered on the western bank of the Connecticut River, along with the oldest surviving house patterns away from the Atlantic coastline.

These findings reveal how a sustainable way of life was maintained in an ever-renewing fabric of natural and cultural cycles—a lifestyle in concert with the land, with sustenance and shelter, trade and transportation, all of this guided by ceremony and ritualized spirituality.

The spoken dialect of the Sokoki evolved from the people's relationship with the land and with one another, and these understandings were passed down through the generations in stories, songs, elders' wisdom, and oral histories. Beyond speech, Native people used hand signs, mnemonic maps and diagrams, and symbolism inscribed on bark, wood, leather, stone, and other natural or woven materials, including wampum—strings of cylindrical beads made from quahog shells



and used as jewelry or money. With their well-established trade routes throughout the eastern half of the continent, the Sokoki were anything but isolated; most of their interactions were with people who had similarly developed place-based lifestyles and belief systems—that is, ways of interacting and communicating with the world around them.



At Wantastegok, near the confluence of the West and Connecticut Rivers, lies one of only two primary petroglyph sites within the borders of today's Vermont. The carvings on a ledge outcropping at the south bank of the Wantastekw / West River are now submerged, covered by the rising waters caused by the construction of the Vernon hydroelectric dam, eight miles downriver, in 1909. First documented in writing by Samuel Williams in *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (1794) and later by Edward Augustus Kendall in *Travels through the Northern Parts of the United States, in the Years 1807 and 1808* (1809), the carvings include multiple thunderbird figures, a canid, and snake-like shapes. Scholars have determined that the carvings are perhaps three thousand years old. Today's Abenaki people consider this a sacred site: the ancestral messages in stone still remain relevant.



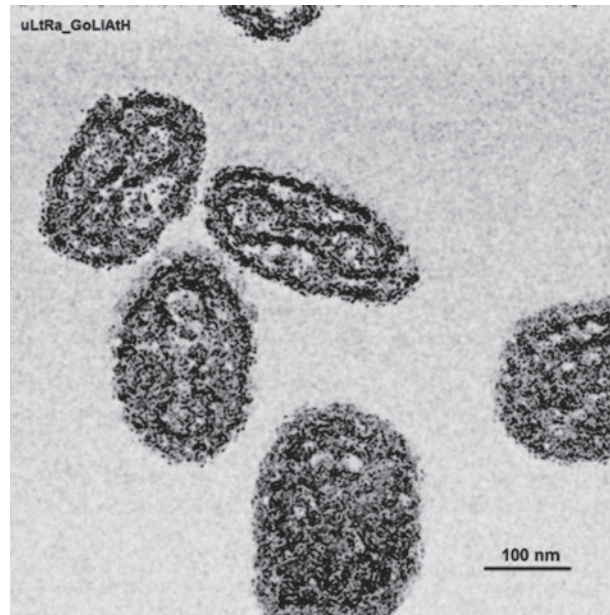
Five hundred years ago, the Abenaki way of life was about to change drastically and irreversibly. Under the pressures of population growth and unsustainable choices in their own homelands, far-ranging Western Europeans began fishing off the North Atlantic coast in the sixteenth century. Coastal peoples, including close Abenaki relations, began trading tobacco, dried fish, copper, meat, and pottery with these newcomers.

With increasing European competition and demand, trade and its associated influences began expanding farther along the coasts and then inland. In 1609, a contingent from France under the command of Samuel de Champlain traveled up the Saint Lawrence River and visited Bitawbagw, “The Lake Known as the Waters Between.” After renaming the lake after himself, Champlain and his Abenaki allies engaged a large party of Iroquois, killing several leaders and precipitating a century-long enmity between the two groups. Already at odds with the Iroquois (speakers of a completely different language), the Abenaki began trading with their new allies, the French.

The French brought with them their Catholic religion, in the form of Jesuit priests and missionaries. In the pursuit of converts, the Jesuits began to learn and record the Native languages. For the first time, Aln8ba8dwaw-8gan—the Western Abenaki language—began to be recorded in written form, and vocabulary began to be exchanged, in tandem with the entirely new concepts embodied in the words—not simply a matter of learning another tongue, but a collision of worldviews.



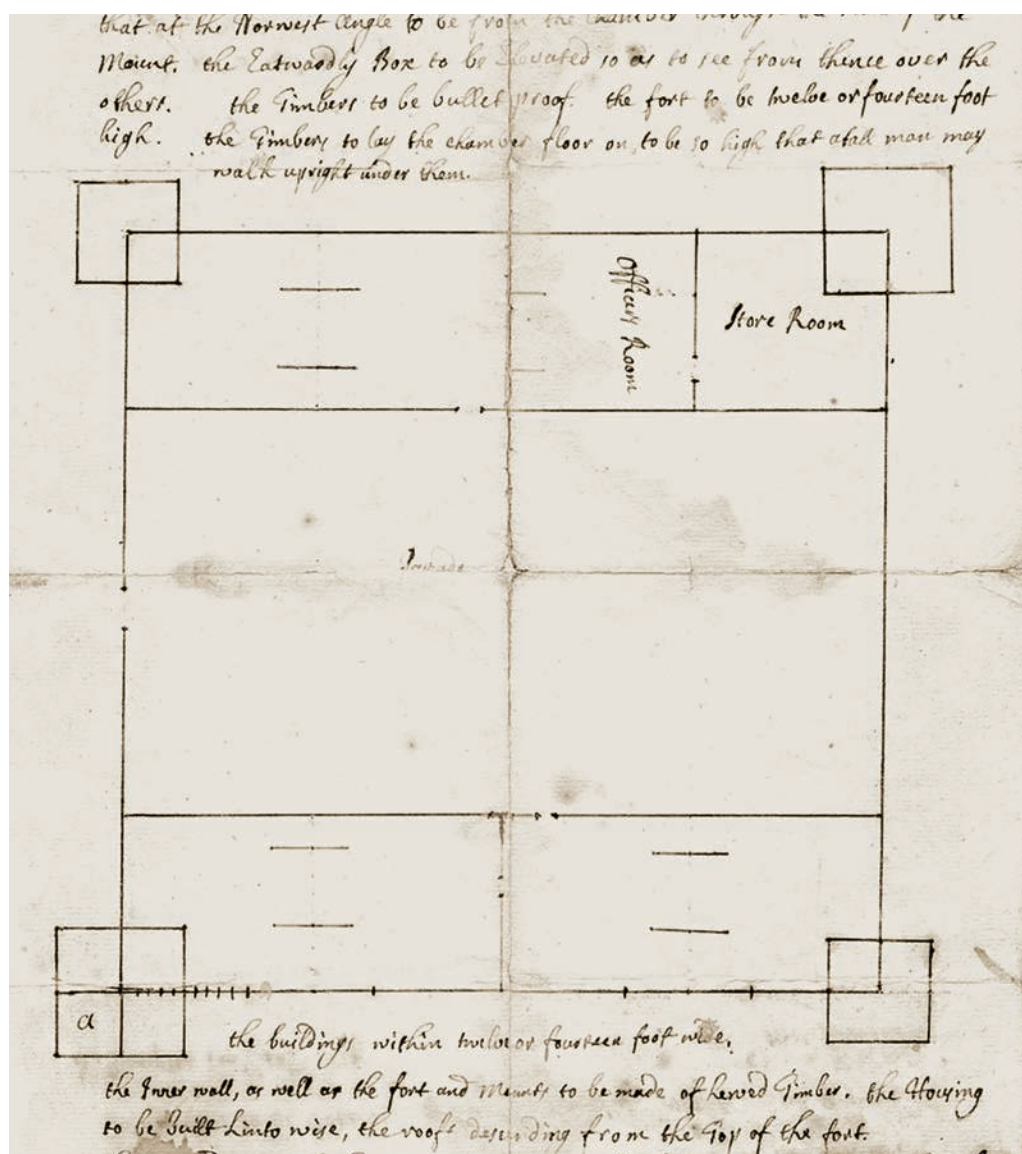
Meanwhile, to the south, the English and Dutch had begun their own series of commercial ventures and colonial land claims, bringing with them their own religious convictions, which were often extremely oppressive. The Europeans also brought diseases to which the indigenous people had little or no immunity. These “virgin-soil epidemics,” as modern-day



Variola viruses, the cause of smallpox, here viewed through an electron microscope.

epidemiologists call them, swept across the land in ravaging waves, reducing the Native population in New England by 75–90 percent after only a few decades—a loss that was devastating to indigenous cultures. The Abenaki were pattern-seeking, problem-solving people who—working with their environment and with one another—had successfully adapted for thousands of years, but the great changes brought by Europeans came in direct opposition to such a lifestyle. The onslaught of germs, guns, and words brought a storm of discord and destruction, as Natives and Europeans participated in futile conversations in meetings where participants spoke past one another.

The English and French were engaged in what is known as settler colonialism—seeking to replace the original population of the colonized territory with a new society of settlers. The Abenaki maintained a longstanding alliance—and a somewhat more amicable relationship—with the French, largely to preserve their positions against the greater English aggression to the south and east. But that alliance put the people and their homelands directly between the competing European powers. Stretches of uneasy coexistence were broken again and again by colonial battles, often precipitated by distant European continental wars for control of empire.



Fort Dummer plan, 1724.

(Courtesy of the Brattleboro
 Historical Society.)

By the early 1700s, the dividing line between cultures had advanced up the fertile Connecticut River Valley to the present northern boundary of Massachusetts. In 1724, to protect the new settlements to the south from Abenaki and French attacks, the Province of Massachusetts Bay built Fort Dummer (named after William Dummer, the provincial governor at the time), on the west bank of the Connecticut River in present-day Brattleboro. For another forty years, the Anglo-Abenaki Wars persisted as the French continued to supply their Native allies with weapons.

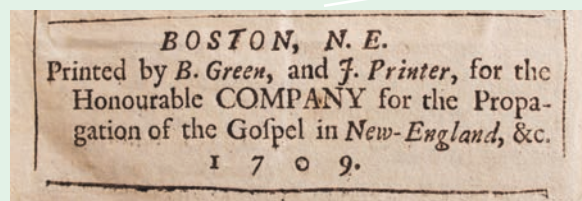
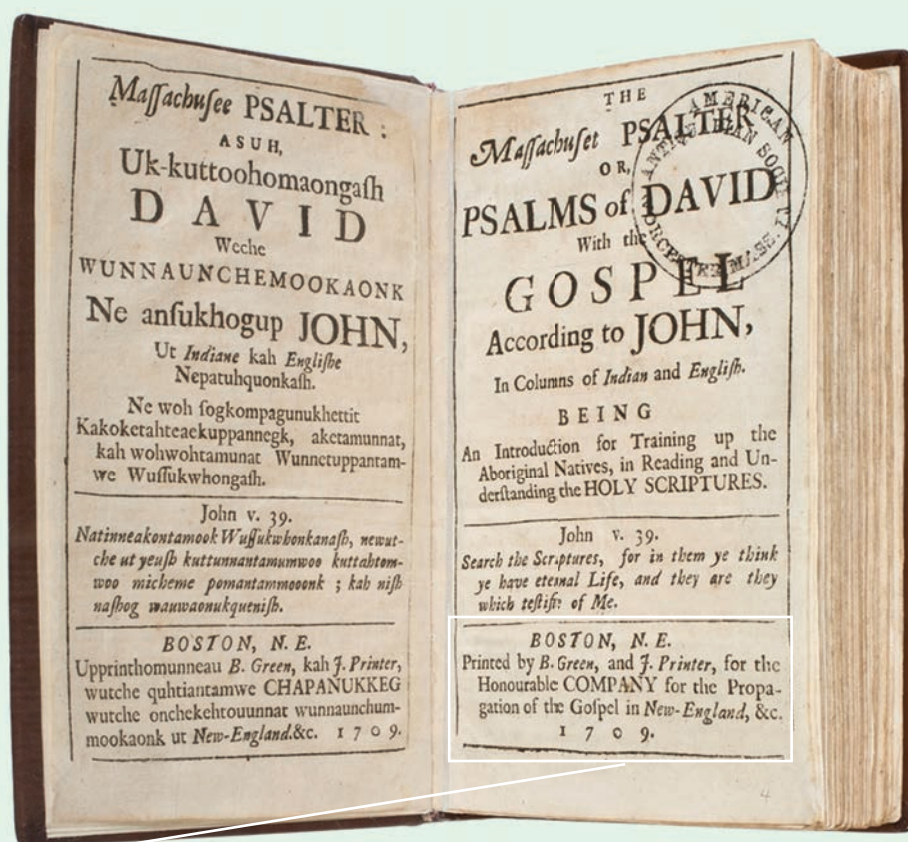


The Abenaki and their ancestors had lived sustainably and successfully in what is now called Vermont for at least twelve thousand years. Then, in a little over a hundred years, their way of life was changed drastically, by disease and destruction brought by people with very different values and behavior.

For those Abenaki who survived, their traditional reciprocal relationship with the environment was upended by warfare, invasion, disease, and trading pressures. The hunting and foraging grounds in the hills of Brattleboro, and the farming and fishing practices along the Connecticut River, had been invaded and claimed by people who did not communicate with the environment in the same language.

James Printer

JAMES PRINTER (1640–1709), whose given name was Wowaus, was a Native American of the Nipmuc tribe in Massachusetts, where his father, Naoas, was a leader of a Christian Native church. In 1659, the nineteen-year-old Wowaus began his studies at Harvard Indian College, built just three years earlier in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to educate both English and Native Americans together and to “propagate the faith.” While there, he worked with Samuel Green as a “printer’s devil”—an assistant—in Green’s printshop, and he was then apprenticed to work on a press that Green had built.

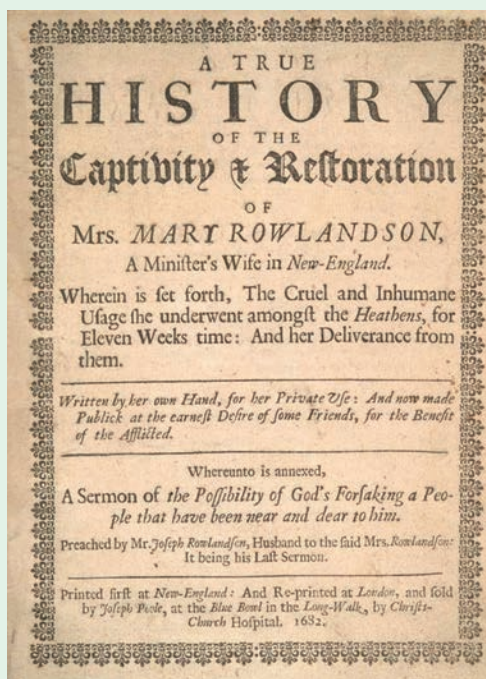


Detail from *The Massachusetts Psalter*, a dual-language edition of the Bay Psalm Book printed in both Massachusett (“Indian”) and English; this is the only book in which James Printer’s name appears on the title page.

(Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.)

Wowaus became so adept at setting type and running the press that he was given the English name James Printer. He was also a talented linguist, fluent in English and several Native American languages, who would help translate the Bible into the indigenous Massachusetts language.

In 1682, James printed *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, the book in which Brattleboro, or what would become Brattleboro, first appeared. Mary Rowland-



son had been a captive and servant to Weetamoo, the female leader of the Pocasset tribe from Rhode Island, who—with great political skill and through five marriages—had built up an alliance that connected many of the New England tribes. Rowlandson’s *Narrative* describes how Weetamoo, realizing that her alliance was breaking apart,

Title page of Mary Rowlandson’s account of her captivity, 1682.

(Courtesy of the Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.)

led her band and family of warriors north from their camp at the mouth of the Ashuelot River and along a trail on the east bank of the Kwenitekw (Connecticut) River across from the mouths of what are now known as the Broad and Whetstone Brooks. With her fifth husband, Quinnapin, Weetamoo joined the Wampanoag chief Metacom in the uprising that the English would call King Philip's War. At the time, Weetamoo had a new baby to care for, and some of her followers and family were sick. In her diary, Rowlandson recorded her tasks as Weetamoo's servant: gathering, cooking, cleaning, sewing, and child care.

The refugees eventually followed their hidden trail to the northern end of the big mountain (Wantastegok, now known as Mount Wantastiquet)—the significant place where the Kwenitekw and Wantastekw (West) Rivers met. Then Quinnapin and Metacom stole back east to Mount Wachusett, near Boston, which they fortified in the hope that the English would now have to sue for peace. One of the Natives who gathered at Wachusett was James Printer, who, on behalf of Metacom, wrote to the English leaders proposing a truce and a captive exchange. It was thanks to Printer's efforts as a diplomat and negotiator that Rowlandson was freed.

By chance, Mary Rowlandson's dramatic tale was later brought to Printer, now back at his printing press. The *Narrative* that he set and printed became a best seller for its time. At its heart is the story of Rowlandson's mistress, the proud Indian queen, Weetamoo, and her bloodthirsty brother-in-law, King Philip. But it is also the tale of James Printer, who had negotiated her safe release, and of a fateful decision in Brattleboro in 1676 to back away from an attack on the English colonies that might have changed history.

— Arthur A. Burrows

But human beings are resilient, and cultures are not static; the Abenaki people persisted, and they are still here in their original lands, as well as much farther afield. They made many adjustments and adaptations over the years, while still maintaining an intrinsic social identity. One way they adjusted was by adopting the European practice of writing, in order to draw acceptance and credibility to their assertions or claims.

In the Abenaki language, the act of writing and drawing is known as *awighigaw8gan* (from *awighiga*, "to mark, draw, or write"), and the resulting communication is *awikhigan*. A telling example of *awikhigan* was created in 1747 by four Native men from the Sokoki homelands, who burned an English fort, referred to as Fort No. 2, at Kchi Ms-kodak—the "Great Meadow" in present-day Putney—and left behind a written message for their enemy. Before the English occupation, the area had been Abenaki planting and harvesting grounds for many generations. In multiple incidents, the Native people resisted and attacked the English garrisons and settlements in hopes of driving them off and regaining control over their ancestral territory.

The "Petition at No. 2" *awikhigan* was a witty, satirical condemnation of the European invasion of the Connecticut River Valley. Turning the tables, the shrewd defenders usurped the methods of the interlopers to rhetorically assert their own rights, and their own worldview, as indigenous inhabitants. This amazing document is preserved in the collections at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

Earlier and farther south in the valley of the Kwenitekw, the cultural adaptations swung the other way. After Fort Dummer was built in 1724, a period of relative quiet persisted for nearly twenty years. Trade and diplomacy were conducted between the colonial governments, settlers, and the indigenous people. But with the next outbreak of hostilities—King George's War in 1744—the Sokoki and their allies reoccupied their homelands nearby, and the English sought to capitalize on the trade prospects.

In 1735, a joint meeting was convened at Deerfield, Massachusetts, just downriver, with deliberate formal speeches in the tradition of indigenous diplomacy, accompanied by the exchange of gifts and wampum. Documents transcribing the discussions and attesting to the agreements (treaties) were signed and witnessed. Massachusetts Bay governor Jonathan Belcher attended with his council, as did more than 130 representatives of multiple Native nations.

The same parties met at Fort Dummer two years later and affirmed these protocols. These agreements became the legal basis for the English occupation of what became Brattleboro, but it is unclear whether the Native people who signed these documents had the same understanding as the English as to what rights and lands were assigned to each group of people or, more fundamentally, whether either side was able to grasp the other side's understanding of its relationships with the



Portrait of William Brattle by John Singleton Copley, painted in 1756, twenty years before Brattle, a British loyalist, fled Boston for Halifax, Nova Scotia, at the onset of the American Revolution.

(Courtesy of the Brattleboro Historical Society.)

Brattleborough or Wantastegok?

Inhabitants of this southeastern Vermont town first lived under the name of Brattleborough—shortened to Brattleboro in 1888—in 1753, when the town was first chartered by New Hampshire's colonial governor, Benning Wentworth, under authority of King George II of Britain. Wentworth had named the new town in honor of his close friend Major General William Brattle Jr. of Cambridge, in the province of Massachusetts Bay. Brattle, considered the wealthiest man in Massachusetts at the time, was one of fifty-some men who purchased claim to this land.

Popular versions of Brattleboro's history presume that Brattle never lived in the area or even visited, but recent evidence points to a visit he made to the area in 1735. Brattle's interest in gauging the lay of the land, before the 1753 grant, stemmed from the fact that in 1716 his father, the Reverend William Brattle, had invested in what were called the Equivalent Lands, which would later become Brattleborough, as part of a deal to settle territorial disputes between Connecticut and Massachusetts.

The settlers, or their agents, recorded many of these deals as paper evidence of ownership. In this way—sometimes through deception and coercion, and often with violence—the rights of Native people to continue within their ancestral homelands were pushed aside. The written word was given precedence over prior

occupancy that had endured for thousands of years, the histories were rewritten to favor the colonists, and the march of civilization continued under new assertions and assumptions.

Beneath it all, the land remained.

This act of naming Brattleboro—a name that has nothing to do with the nature of the place itself—demonstrates the cultural divide between the European newcomers and the indigenous people. Based on a weak allusion to an absentee land speculator (Brattle), *Brattleborough* would take on meaning only when accepted by social convention. Its acceptance and use, in turn, legitimized the narrative from which it originated—an assertion of title and privilege attested by a written document.

But to the Sokoki people, the name of this place was, and remains, Wantastegok (At the River Where Something Is Lost)—a direct reference to the singular natural characteristics of the landscape itself and to the relationship between the land and its inhabitants.

—J.R. & R.H.

land itself: where Natives thought they were sharing the land with the English, the English thought they were purchasing the land and becoming sole owners. Despite the public solemnity of these carefully orchestrated gatherings between the English and the Native delegations—records of which survive in the special collections at Brattleboro’s Brooks Memorial Library—in fact, clandestine planning for further land acquisitions by the English was taking place behind closed chamber doors down the river.



The European colonizers of the area based their claims on two basic arguments. The first of these to be printed was that the Sokoki Abenaki had lived here but had chosen the wrong side in the last two wars between European superpowers, and so, as losers, had lost their title to the land. This view is found in *A History of Vermont, from Its First Settlement to the Present Time*, one of the first comprehensive written histories of the area, penned by Francis Eastman and printed in 1828 by Brattleboro publishers Holbrook & Fessenden. According to Eastman, when the Native Americans sided with the French and lost to the English during the French and Indian War (before siding with the English against the Americans during the revolution and losing again), “the Indian claim became entirely extinguished, and the right to the lands in question was vested in Vermont.”

The second often-printed argument was that before the arrival of Europeans in the seventeenth century, this land, mostly a desolate wilderness, was used for hunting and fishing but that no one actually resided here. In his 1842 *History of Vermont, Natural, Civil and Statistical*, Zadock Thompson asserted that “Canada Indians and the French” traveled south from the Saint Lawrence River to attack English settlers in Vermont but that the Abenaki only hunted in Vermont and had no residential claim to the land.

Similarly, Edward Conant, in his *Vermont Historical Reader*—the official Vermont school text from 1890 to 1925—claimed that “very few Indians lived in Vermont when white men first came here, though hunting parties and war parties often passed through, and sometimes a party would camp all summer in a good place.” Mary R. Cabot echoed this argument in her *Annals of Brattleboro, 1681–1895*, writing that “there is no evidence that the valley along the Connecticut River was ever the home of any considerable number of aborigines, although for many years the early settlements were harassed by Indian attacks and Indian depredations.”

Beginning in the 1780s, Ira Allen—known as one of the founders of Vermont—and his relatives used a published settlement between New York State Natives and the Canadian government to establish that Indian claims below the 45th parallel could not be accepted in court. They adopted the first written argument of those in power: that by siding with the losers in two wars, the Natives had lost any claim to the land. In 1799, the governor of Vermont, Isaac Tichenor, supported that argument by reporting to the Vermont Legislature that “the claims of the Indians have been extinguished.”

The state’s government thus completely banned any Native land claims in the state to this day. Only in 2010 did Vermont at last officially recognize the Abenaki as an indigenous people of the region.



So what is the value of printing and publishing? That depends, of course, on what is being printed and published. Is it the truth? Is it a way to establish an honest collective story to pass from one generation to the next? Or is it a means for those in power to legitimize their claims?

The Sokoki Abenaki of Vermont have their own answers to these questions.